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AUTHOR Wertz, Christopher A.
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ABSTRACT

An experiment was carried out at the University of Wyoming with a group of beginning students of Russian. The group consisted of about 30 students at the beginning of the experiment, but by the second semester, the number had been reduced to 15. The method used in this experiment was based on the assumption that true learning occurs when students are aware of having figured something out for themselves, and that traditional methods do little to foster this ability. In this method, grammar and vocabulary features are introduced in a context which allows the students to make an intelligent guess as to meaning or rule. Nothing is drilled until it has been understood, and various techniques are used to verify that the student has understood. This method was very successful in this experiment, although it must be pointed out that the group was a very bright one, and that therefore teachers must use their judgment in using this technique. (AM)

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AN EXPERIMENT IN BEGINNING LANGUAGE TEACHING

The experiment with which this paper will be concerned was carried out at the University of Wyoming in 1975-76 with a group of beginning Russian students that consisted originally of about thirty people in two classes and by the second semester had shrunk to approximately fifteen people in a single class. The approach taken to the problem of teaching beginning language was based on my own haphazardly successful experience in the classroom and certain ideas arising from a consideration of the generally accepted methodology for foreign language teaching in American colleges.

Perhaps everyone will agree that the generally accepted methodology always includes at least the following: learning words and grammar, listening, repeating, reading, followed by some sort of independent use of the language on the part of the student --conversation, retelling something he has heard or read, drills in which he is expected to construct phrases or sentences on his own, exercises in which he is expected to understand (in reading or speech) material that has been covered. In other words, the student first learns material, and then tries to use it.

The method outlined above (let us call it the standard method) is so clearly a matter of common sense that many teachers undoubtedly consider it the only possible one. However, both the experience of learning a foreign language and the results of the standard method give rise to doubts. Anyone who has learned a foreign language adequately learned some of what he knows, perhaps even that important something that makes him a speaker of the language and not just someone who has studied it, by suddenly catching the meaning of things he had not been exposed to before. Knowledge gained in this way has a special value because the student has figured something out for himself, and also because it often involves subtleties that never seem to get adequately covered in language courses. The defenders of the standard method do not, of course, deny the value of learning things by figuring them out. It is assumed that after the courses the students will read and speak the target language on their own in order to "polish it up." This assumption often proves incorrect, because in many cases the student feels after his first attempt at handling a book in the target language on his own or his first conversation with a native speaker that he has not learned anything. The problem is that in the book or the conversation were new words and expressions that confused him so that he could not respond properly. This can be a very frustrating experience, but good students of language develop skill in handling it. They learn to guess the meaning of new words from context (both linguistic and extra-linguistic) and from their morphological make-up. Everyone will admit that the ability to guess the meaning of new words and expressions is very important when you are dealing with a living language, but the standard method, at least in its beginning phase, does very little to foster this ability.

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For example, when we cover word-formation, which could be very useful in developing the ability to guess, instead of forcing the student to think about the meaning of prefixes, suffixes, roots, and their combinations we give him that information outright. The students' knowledge increases in this way, but his ability to guess, as such, does not improve. With regard to most aspects of a beginning language course, it is fair to say that the standard method comes down to giving the student information which he must then assimilate. The role of the student is passive. He always

knows what is demanded of him. If he is conscientious and always follows our instructions, he will always know the meaning of words that he hears in class, and when he is reading he can always resort to a dictionary or vocabulary. It is no wonder that his first encounter with the real language is often a disaster.

Since I had been thinking along the lines outlined above and had a particularly strong group of students, I decided to try out various methods of developing the students' ability to guess. What this amounted to at first was simply introducing new words and grammar, insofar as possible, in the course of conversation in Russian. I demanded an immediate reaction in Russian from the student, such as an answer to a question or a sentence of his own construction, etc. It was, of course, necessary to warn the students that they would encounter unfamiliar words and expressions in class so that they would not be unpleasantly surprised. I told them that they should always try to guess what I was talking about although sometimes it would be difficult and that they should treat it as a sort of a game. From the point of view of the prevalent philosophy of education, such a procedure is unfair, and it took some explaining to get it accepted. I told them it would not hurt their grades if they had trouble guessing. In any case, they soon found it not so difficult and in fact a lot of fun.

I introduced numbers as follows: I had the students repeat the numbers from one to ten (without explanation). Then I started and they had to finish. Then I said the numbers in Russian and the students had to translate them into English, then the other way around. Then I began to give page numbers in Russian, and they had to guess from context and roots the meanings of words, such as 50, 200, etc. When they understood and reacted satisfactorily, I began asking them, "what page does today's lesson begin on?," etc. All this was done without the aid of written forms, which were introduced later.

From the first day I put the students in situations which themselves suggested the meanings of words. During one class period, for example, I introduced each student to his neighbor and suggested what words would be an appropriate response. Then the students introduced their neighbors to each other.

In a similar exercise, I divided the students into families and gave each student a story about himself which included his profession. Then they described their families and their position in their families, visited each other, etc. Many new words, whose meanings were clear from the context, were learned in this way. If, for instance, a student knows the words for father and mother and is told that he is the father of the family and Olga is the mother and then told that Olga is his "zhena," he cannot help but understand that the word "zhena" means "wife."

Words designating objects in the classroom were also introducted without translation. Such structures as "What is this?" and "This is a pencil," were introduced without explanation in Berlitz fashion. Their meaning is clear from the situation in which the teacher and the students find themselves, everyone knows that such sentences are mandatory in the first stage of learning a new language.

Later on I began to introduce words referring to the qualities of things and people in the same manner. It is easy to imagine how this is done with such words as "short" and "red," etc., but more difficult with words d signating abstractions. One technique involves depending on your students' knowledge of each other. After two or three weeks they know each other fairly well, and if the teacher says that Peter is "lazy" and asks who else in the class is "lazy," he will easily get the names of Martha and Harry, although the student did not know the meaning of the word before. What words

can be introduced in this fashion depends on the peculiarities of the given group of students and their relationship to each other and to their teacher. The names of feelings and emotions can also be introduced by referring to people in the classroom, or they can be introduced by simply describing typical situations in which they arise.

I often introduced new grammar without explanation, simply by giving examples. It is relatively easy, for example, to introduce the conditional-subjunctive mood in this way because it involves no new endings--it always consists of the particle by and the verbs in the past tense. So one can simply give a series of sentences such as: "I want to buy a car, but I don't have the money. If I had the money, I would buy the car," and then ask the students to give similar examples.

The textbook we used, Introductory Russian Grammar (Stillman and Harkins), is not ideal, but its grammar explanations are adequate for a beginning class and I explained grammar in class as little as possible--usually only when there were questions from the students, or when I felt the explanation in the textbook was too complicated or inaccurate. The words and expressions which I introduced in the course of conversation in Russian usually (but not always) appeared later in the textbook. The role of the textbook was essentially auxiliary--it helped the students absorb what they were learning in class.

As the knowledge of my students grew and I got used to the new method, I began to use more and more complicated techniques. Sometimes I asked my students to translate a sentence into English that contained several unfamiliar words and expressions, for example, a sentence like, Ja nikogda ne chital perevod biblii korolja Dzhejmsa. The students already knew the words nikogda "never," chitat' "to read," perevodit' "to translate," and, of course, Ja "I" and ne "not." The words perevod "translation," biblia "Bible," Dzhejms "James," and korol' "king," were unfamiliar, but the students guessed the meaning of the sentence immediately. The words biblija and Dzhejms are very close to their English equivalents. The meaning of perevod is clear if one knows perevodit'. No linguistic facts helped the students with the meaning of korol', but it is clear from the context and the well-known fact of the existence of a King James translation of the Bible.

Generally known facts and culture often played a large role in this sort of exercise. A typical example is the following: I wrote on the board in Russian (with no English translation) a number of unfamiliar words, korzina "basket," lekarstvo "medicine," cvety "flowers," rvat' "pick," xvost "tail, ushy "ears," etc. Then I told the students the story of Little Red Riding Hood in Russian and, of course, they easily guessed the meaning of the words on the board.

I used various methods for checking my students' comprehension of what was going on in class. Quite often it was obvious from a student's response whether he had understood what had been said, but sometimes, as in the preceding example, I resorted to translation into English. I feel translation is justified if it does not disturb the immediate reaction of the student (I asked students to translate only after they had reacted in Russian), and it allows the teacher to check quickly and accurately how well he has been understood.

The atmosphere in the classroom is of essential importance in the method discussed here. Intense competition between students should not be allowed to develop. The students must not be afraid to make mistakes. Each student must feel that everyone in the classroom wants him to speak and understand well. The extent to which the teacher is able to use the language in such a way that the students can grasp the

meaning of new words and expressions without explanation is obviously also important in this method. A third factor which influences its effectiveness is the constitution of the class. Clearly there are groups where it will be highly effective and others where it will be less successful. The teacher must be able to judge which techniques will be effective with his group of students.

Before boasting about the results, I should point out that the students who took part in the experiment constituted the brightest group of beginning students I have ever had. The results surpassed all expectations. All of the students who finished two semesters understood Russian better than the four students that finished the third-year course that year. Some of the first-year students even spoke Russian better than the third-year students (in this context it is important to remember that the third-year group was an average one).

In conclusion, I would like to say that the method outlined here differs from both the audio-lingual method and the traditional grammar method. The audio-lingual method often involves a great deal of pattern drill where the student is expected to arrive at the grammar inductively. In my approach the grammar is explained at length in the textbook and, when necessary, in class. Nothing is drilled which has not been fully understood from explanation or illustration, and the teacher constantly uses various techniques to check whether the student has understood. The method outlined here differs from the traditional grammar method in its emphasis on understanding and speaking. It differs from both methods in its recognition of the fundamental importance of the ability to guess. I realize that many teachers have long been using techniques to foster this ability, including those mentioned here. What I am suggesting is that these techniques should become part of standard language teaching methodology rather than remaining the prerogative of individual teachers looking for ways to vary the standard way of teaching beginning language.

--Christopher A. Wertz
University of Iowa, Iowa City

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